

“The Red River Valley” Re-Examined

EDITH FOWKE

THE SONG GENERALLY KNOWN as “The Red River Valley” is one of the most widespread of North American folk songs. It has been sung as “The Bright Mohawk Valley,” “The Bright Sherman Valley,” “The Green Little Valley,” “The Dear Little Valley,” “The Cowboy’s Love Song,” “Little Darling,” “The Red River Girl,” and “Saint Regis Maiden,” and has been reported from oral tradition from at least a dozen states and from five Canadian provinces.

It has been generally assumed that the many versions of the song are all derived from “In the Bright Mohawk Valley” which James J. Kerrigan published in 1896.¹ In one of its earliest appearances in a folk song collection, Carl Sandburg noted: “The popular song ‘In the Bright Mohawk Valley’ went through changes in the seaboard and mountain states of the south. It became ‘The Red River Valley’; it went west and became a cowboy love song, the end line speaking of ‘the cowboy that’s waiting for you’ or ‘the half-breed that’s waiting for you’.”²

Similarly, the Lomaxes noted: “This latter-day western piece stands as proof of what folk-singers can do to refine and purify a song which comes to them from written sources. It has its origin in a ditty from New York State, ‘The Bright Mohawk Valley’,”³ and Sigmund Spaeth wrote: “James J. Kerrigan’s ‘In the Bright Mohawk Valley’ seems to have been the original of the still popular ‘Red River Valley’ and as such must be considered noteworthy.”⁴

Those quotations are typical of many similar ones that might be cited, and to date no editor appears to have questioned the above theory of the song’s origin. When including it in *Folk Songs of Canada* in 1954, I accepted this theory and wrote:

“The Red River Valley” is probably the best known folk song in the prairie

¹ “In the Bright Mohawk Valley.” Words and music by James J. Kerrigan (New York: Howley, Haviland & Co., copyright 1896), Sheet music.

² Carl Sandburg, *The American Songbag* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1927), p. 130.

³ John A. and Alan Lomax, *Folk Song, U.S.A.* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1947), p. 199.

⁴ Sigmund Spaeth, *A History of Popular Music in America* (New York: Random House, 1948), p. 289.

provinces. Most Canadians naturally associate it with the Red River that flows into Lake Winnipeg, but like many other folk songs it has had a varied career. It started out in New York in 1896 as a popular song called "In the Bright Mohawk Valley." As it spread westward the name was changed to suit the locality, and among the cowboys it became "The Red River Valley" in honor of the river that forms the boundary between Texas and Oklahoma. In that form it was easily transplanted to the Canadian west. Mr. Harry Hutchcroft of Calgary, Alberta, assays that it was sung at least fifty years ago in the logging camps of southern Manitoba and then the refrain ran: "Remember the Red River Valley and the half-breed who loved you so true." ⁵

Since 1954 considerable evidence has come to light showing that "The Red River Valley" was sung in Canada well before 1896, and it now seems practically certain that the song originally commemorated not the bright Mohawk Valley or the Red River Valley of Texas, but the Red River that flows into Lake Winnipeg. There are several indications that the song was sung in Canada during the North-West Rebellion of 1869, commonly known as the Red River Rebellion, and that it then told of the love of a half-breed girl for one of the British soldiers who came west to suppress the rising.

For those unfamiliar with Canadian history it may be briefly noted that in 1869 the North-West Territories (comprising all the land between Ontario and British Columbia, until then owned by the Hudson's Bay Company under a royal charter dating back to 1670) were acquired by the newly formed Dominion of Canada, and plans were made for setting up the Province of Manitoba in the eastern section which included the Red River Settlement first established by Lord Selkirk in 1811. The Métis, or French half-breeds, who made up a large part of the population of this sparsely settled area, feared that they would lose their land, and their leader, Louis Riel, set up a provisional Red River Government at Fort Garry to negotiate with the Dominion of Canada. Soon the tense situation erupted into violence, and the Canadian government sent out troops (including British regulars and Canadian volunteers) under the command of General Garnet Wolseley to restore order. Before General Wolseley reached Fort Garry, Riel and some of his followers fled to the States, and the Province of Manitoba was established. Later, in 1885, Riel returned to lead a similar rebellion in Saskatchewan, which resulted in his capture and execution.

In 1955, the year after *Folk Songs of Canada* appeared, Lord Beaverbrook, the British newspaper baron who grew up in the Miramichi region of New Brunswick, wrote to the publisher (July 8, 1955), saying: "I was always told that 'Red River Valley' was the soldiers' song in the North-West Rebellion. Is

⁵ Edith Fowke and Richard Johnston, *Folk Songs of Canada* (Waterloo: Waterloo Music Company, 1954), p. 89.

there any evidence to show that the song was known in the U.S.A. before the date of the rebellion?" In answer to a letter asking for further information he wrote (Oct. 7, 1955): "Here is my own testimony. I was familiar with the song before 1896. I left the Miramichi about 1894. The song was well-known to me there."

Following that correspondence, I wrote to the *Winnipeg Free Press* asking for recollections of old-timers. Several replies mentioned hearing it around the turn of the century, but the most significant letter, from J. S. Wiggins of St. Vital, Manitoba (March 3, 1956), said:

I remember hearing this song as far back as 1891. There was a timber gang taking timber off my father's lush farm near Bell's Lake in Glenely Township East. There was a old man amongst them who could both sing and play the violin, and they had a camp in the bush and my young brother and I used to sneak out at night to hear the man sing and play that song. I know my father was living then and he died in 1892. The modern version seems to have changed the song somewhat. At that time it was a half-breed girl making her complaint to a white man. Now they have the other way around and it does not make sense.

Early in 1960 Hugh Dempsey, archivist of the Glenbow Foundation, a historical research organization in Calgary, came across a version of "The Red River Valley" in an undated clipping from the *Calgary Herald* among the papers of Col. Gilbert E. Sanders who had been a member of the North-West Mounted Police in 1885. As this copy is typical of various other early versions, it seems worth quoting it in full:

O consider awhile ere you leave me,
Do not hasten to bid me adieu,
But remember the Red River Valley,
And the half-breed that loved you so true.

It's a long time, you know, I've been waiting
For the words that you never did say,
But alas! all my fond hopes have vanished,
For they tell me you're going away.

From this valley they say you are going,
I shall miss your blue eyes and sweet smile,
And you take with you all of the sunshine
That has brightened my pathway awhile.

So remember the valley you're leaving,
How lonely and dreary 'twill be;
Remember the heart you are breaking
And be true to your promise to me.

As you go to your home by the ocean
May you never forget those sweet hours
That we spent in the Red River valley
And the love we exchanged 'mid its bowers.

There never could be such a longing
In the heart of a pale maiden's breast
As dwells in the heart you are breaking
With love for the boy who came west.

And the dark maiden's prayer for her love
To the Spirit that rules all this world
Is that sunshine his pathway may cover
And the grief of the Red River Girl.

Chorus: So consider awhile ere you leave me
Do not hasten to bid me adieu,
But remember the Red River Valley
And the half-breed that loved you so true.

As Mr. Dempsey pointed out, the references to the "home by the ocean" and "the boy who came west" are consistent with the theory that it referred to a British soldier returning to his home after the Rebellion. Another Alberta version⁶ includes an even more significant line: "As you sail far across the wide ocean," which is hard to explain in terms of a cowboy hero.

Mr. Dempsey passed on this information to a western journalist, Kenneth Liddell, who published an article in the *Calgary Herald* (April 22, 1960) suggesting that the song originated during the first Riel uprising in Manitoba in 1869. As a result of that article several personal recollections came to light. A pioneer Calgary lawyer, J. E. A. MacLeod, Q.C., recalled that he heard the song in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, before he left there in 1892 for the west, and that it had been his understanding that it referred to a half-breed girl and a militiaman. Senator Gladstone of Cardston, Alberta, also remembered hearing the song during his school days in Pincher Creek, Alberta, in 1894. Mrs. Jack Bullough, another Calgary pioneer, remembered having heard it "at a medicine show in Finch, in the Ottawa valley" when she was seven years old. As Mrs. Bullough was then 76, she dated the hearing to 1891.

In a letter to Mr. Dempsey after she had read Mr. Liddell's article, Mrs. G. J. Buck of Regina wrote (Sept. 4, 1960):

My mother, Dr. Elizabeth Matheson, died two years ago at the age of ninety-two. Her mind was clear to the very last, her memory for the early years most helpful to me for I was interested in all I could learn of her rather remarkable life. In

⁶ Marius Barbeau, Arthur Bourinot, and Arthur Lismer, *Come A-Singing!* (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1947), pp. 7-8.

the notes I made over a long period of time, I have a reference to the song "The Red River Valley." She told me once, when she happened to hear it on the radio, "That's the song Jim sang when he and Jennie were engaged to be married." They were married in 1887. Jim Scott was her eldest brother, and he married Jennie Henderson, a descendant of the Lord Selkirk settlers, a cousin of my father's. There could be no mistake about my mother's recollection, I am sure, nor her placing of the time. Her father brought his family to Morris, Manitoba, in 1878 from Ontario, and his eldest son farmed there with the father until about 1887-1890. But my mother left Manitoba in the early spring of 1887 for Belleville and then Queen's, and was in India for two years, not returning to Canada, when her own marriage against her brother's advice led to a certain estrangement between them that was finally quite healed, but there would have been no opportunities for her to hear him singing "The Red River Valley" later than 1887.

In July, 1962, I wrote to the editor of *The Western Producer*, a weekly farm newspaper published in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, asking that any of his readers who had heard the song before 1896 should inform me of the circumstances. Mrs. Jessie M. Bresnaham of Watino, Alberta, wrote as follows (July 30, 1962): "I am an old lady. This song was sung to me many times in 1888 in Manitoba, 80 miles southwest of Winnipeg where my people moved to from Ontario in 1880," and Mr. J. L. Williamson of Glen Lake, British Columbia, wrote (August 6, 1962):

I came West with my people in the spring of 1886. They settled in southern Manitoba in the Pembina Valley area. My first recollection of hearing that song would be about 1887 but definitely not later than 1888. My uncle who lived with us and who had been working at Fort Garry (now Winnipeg) and in the Red River Valley area used to sing it very often. He was quite a good singer.

Still another old-timer, Mr. William Ferguson of Drumheller, Alberta, wrote (July 29, 1962): "I learned the Red River Valley song off by heart in the middle '90's when only 8 years old. I was born in 1887 and I always thought it was written in Manitoba on the Red River." Mr. Ferguson then goes on to quote the song as he remembers it, giving nine stanzas, six of which parallel the Sanders version quoted earlier.

In most of the nine recollections cited above, the date of hearing the song is related to specific circumstances which make error unlikely. It might be assumed that one or two such reports resulted from faulty memory, but the total is convincing. It may therefore be safely concluded that "The Red River Valley" was widely known throughout Canada before 1896. It is particularly significant that the evidence places it in five widely separated provinces of Canada, from New Brunswick and Nova Scotia on the east coast through the central province of Ontario to the western provinces of Manitoba and Alberta. Thus, while the earliest date mentioned is 1887, it is obvious that the

song must have originated considerably before that date in order to have become so widely distributed at a time when transportation in Canada was comparatively primitive.

In considering United States versions of the song, it is significant that it does not appear in the comprehensive collection of cowboy songs published by John Lomax in 1910, and when it was included in the revised edition, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, in 1938, it was drawn from two songbooks published in 1932.⁷

The only reference tending to place the song in the western states before 1896 is by D. J. O'Malley who said his "Sweet Bye and Bye Revisited" ("Tonight as I lay on the prairie looking up at the stars in the sky") was in the middle eighties sung to either "Red River Valley" or "My Bonnie."⁸ Without corroboratory evidence it may be assumed that Mr. O'Malley's memory placed the period somewhat early. Even if he is accurate, it is still possible that the Canadian version could have reached the western plains by the 1880's.

Most of the printed versions found in American collections may be divided roughly into two groups: those which appear to be related to a fairly long song similar to the one previously quoted from the Sanders collection and which contain stanzas similar to the fifth, sixth, and seventh in that version; and shorter, more generalized versions which may have been derived from "In the Bright Mohawk Valley." For comparison, it may be useful to quote here the words of the copyright form of "In the Bright Mohawk Valley":

Oh they say from this valley you're going,
We shall miss your sweet face and bright smile,
You will take with you all the sunshine
That has gladdened our hearts for awhile.

I have waited a long time my darling,
For those words that your lips ne'er would say,
Now the hope from my heart has departed,
And I'm told you're going away.

Chorus: For the sake of the past, do not leave me,
Do not hasten to bid me adieu!
Oh, remain in this bright Mohawk valley,
With the fond heart that lives but for you.

Do you think of the valley you're leaving?
Oh, how dreary 'twill be when you go,
Have you thought of the heart, so lonely,
That has loved you and cherished you so.

⁷ John A. and Alan Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (3rd printing; New York: Macmillan Co., 1938), p. 298.

⁸ D. J. O'Malley, *Cowboy Poet* (1934), p. 8.

Tell me not that our lives must be severed,
Give me back, love, the smile once so dear,
Oh! this valley would lost [sic] all its brightness,
If its fairest of flow'rs were not here.

The earliest United States version bearing a definite date of which I have been able to obtain information is a pencil manuscript in the Edwin Ford Piper collection at the University of Iowa which bears the notation at the bottom: "Namaha 1879, Harlow 1885." Its six stanzas correspond closely to the Sanders version except that it omits the sixth stanza. As Iowa is considerably closer to the northern Red River than to the one in Texas, it may be concluded that this was an offshoot of the Canadian version.

One of the most extensive sources of information on "The Red River Valley" is the Robert Gordon collection. Robert W. Gordon, the first chief of the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress, was for a number of years during the 1920's editor of a department, "Old Songs That Men Have Sung," in *Adventure Magazine*. During this time he had extensive correspondence with contributors to his column, and the songs which they sent in he had typed and bound into volumes which are now in the Library of Congress. The Library has not yet obtained the rights to the original letters from which the texts were taken, so some details on the correspondence are lacking. However, an examination of the items relating to "The Red River Valley" is illuminating. Some twenty-six items give versions which vary from one to seven stanzas, and half a dozen of these offer points of interest.

An anonymous correspondent from Salt Lake City wrote: "The first time I heard it sung was in 1869 in the central part of Iowa, the next time in Glenwood, Missouri, by a girl that worked in the Main Hotel, this was in 1897. The next time was in Florence, Colorado, in 1900, and the last time in Salt Lake in 1913." ⁹ Frank Spaulding gives a version "as sung by Miss Mae Preston at Namakagon Lake, Bayfield County, Wisconsin, in the summer of 1891," ¹⁰ and C. S. West notes: "I heard this song in Michigan in the year 1883, sung by Mrs. Laura Custer, Orange Township, Ionia, Michigan." ¹¹

Charles E. Roe, who gives a full seven-stanza version corresponding very closely to the Canadian (Sanders) version, wrote: "I heard it in 1903, but the woman who sung it to me said her mother sung it as a girl, which would put it about 1860." ¹² This is the earliest date mentioned, but as it is an approximation at third hand, it cannot be accepted as reliable. However, it tends to strengthen the assumption that the long version is the early form. Also, the

⁹ *Gordon Collection*, item No. 432.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, item No. 2436.

¹¹ *Ibid*, item No. 2708.

¹² *Ibid*, items Nos. 2343 and 2359.

fact that the other three correspondents cited above who mention dates before 1896 heard the song in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Michigan, respectively, reinforces the assumption that it originated in the Red River Valley of the north. The only apparently conflicting statement comes from H. E. Buechle who wrote: "It was first sung to me by a young lady from Missouri about 1888. The young lady's mother told me the song was written about the Red River Valley of 'Texarana,' wherever that may be. The song was an old one at that time."¹³ "Texarana" is presumably a reference to the southwest, but as the statement is merely an opinion without any corroborating evidence, it is not particularly significant.

Two letters strengthen the assumption that the song dates from the Red River Rebellion of 1869. W. B. Rawson wrote: "It is supposed to have been a half-breed girl's farewell to her lover, a soldier in the Wolseley Red River Expedition in the 70's. I've often heard it sung in various camps around Winnipeg, Canada, in the early nineties."¹⁴ Even more explicit was the comment of R. B. Wallace:

Some years ago a friend whose home was in Montreal told me that at one time a crack Canadian regiment had been stationed in the Red River Valley locality. The officers were well thought of socially, but seem to have philandered among the Indian girls to some extent. The white girls, of course, resented this, and at a farewell ball given to the officers on the occasion of their transfer, the young lady who had composed this song rose and sang it, much to the embarrassment of the ones at whom it was aimed.¹⁵

Neither of those letters could be considered conclusive by itself, but taken with the other evidence, they make it almost certain that "The Red River Valley" was known and sung in the Canadian west at least as early as 1869. Two other Canadian items suggest that it may have predated the Red River Rebellion.

In an article in *The Western Home Monthly* for June, 1930, Elizabeth Bailey Price wrote:

The song was sung on the Red River trail by traders and Métis between Fort Garry and St. Cloud, Minnesota, the end of steel. It was learned by the settlers of the Red River from the 1868 survey party on the Immigration Road from St. Anne du Chene and Dawson. CPR road gangs sang it.

As a result of reading Ken Liddell's article on "The Red River Valley" when it was reprinted in the *Toronto Evening Telegram*, Mrs. Ashley Lun-

¹³ *Ibid*, item No. 2776.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, item No. 2506.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, item No. 3133.

ham of Minden, Ontario, wrote to Mr. Dempsey of the Glenbow Foundation on May 24, 1960:

My great grandmother Margot Soule, born in the block house at Kingston, Ont., on the night of the second Finian Raid, 1834, had in her possession the original copy of this song as a poem and she was very fond of it in its musical setting. . . . She told me this poem had been written for a sister, Amaryllis Milligan, by Jethro de la Roche. The young couple had been engaged, but the girl developed tuberculosis and would not marry. The boy, heart-broken, had gone to the west. He gave the girl the poem the day he left for ever. Grandmother had carefully preserved this token of affection in her Bible but unfortunately after she died it was not kept. . . . My great uncle, Louis Soule, who served in the Riel Rebellion, told my great grandmother that people out west were singing the poem that Jethro had written, and taught her the music. Apparently it was composed as a poem in the east, set to music and had verses appropriate added in the west, as the verses mentioned in this article were not included in the original.

Both of these accounts may be true, but without further confirmation they cannot be accepted unquestioningly. It may never be possible to prove exactly when and where "The Red River Valley" originated, but we can safely conclude that it predated the copyright version, "In the Bright Mohawk Valley," by several decades. It also seems reasonably certain that it was sung along the Red River Valley of the north before it reached the Texas Red River, and that its early form told of an Indian or half-breed girl lamenting the departure of her white lover.¹⁶

Toronto, Canada

¹⁶ Thanks are due to Mrs. Rae Korson, Austin E. Fife, Philip Kennedy, Ken Liddell, Hugh Dempsey, and Lillian Gibbons who sent me helpful information and to all the informants quoted in the article.